

Learn how to handle your ATV

If you live or drive in the mountains, you're sure to notice that more and more adventure seekers are turning to the all-terrain vehicle (ATV). Today it's estimated there are about 15 million Americans enjoying the pleasures of these vehicles.

Whether you are using them as an adjunct for your work, to clear snow on your ranch, or just for fun, it's best to know that the injuries from the use of these machines are also on the rise. In 2001 there was a noted 17 percent rise in the injuries associated with ATVs. And, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, there have been 4,541 deaths related to their use.

Common ATV injuries include chest trauma, injuries after rolling backward, and head injuries associated with unintentionally driving through barbed-wire fences. Research has shown that most of the injuries are due to ATV misuse and inappropriate ride behavior. With this in mind, here are some guidelines for staying safe while using your ATV.

- Users should always remember Safety First. You should read and act in accordance with the owner's manual and warning labels.
- Vehicles for adults have permanently affixed labels to warn parents that children younger than 16 should not operate a vehicle intended for adults.
- Practice makes perfect. So, practice driving your ATV in a safe area before driving on more difficult terrain. You must be able to balance your vehicle in any terrain type or terrain change. Never operate an ATV on public roads or paved surfaces. ATVs are intended for off-road use only and have special low-pressure tires. These tires are made to grip uneven surfaces and on a paved road there is not much for them to grip.
- Your apparel will help prevent injuries if you appropriately utilize the gear. Keep in mind that you should always wear an approved motorcycle helmet. It will be your most important piece of protective gear. In addition you should have goggles or a full-face shield.
- An important asset is also over-the-calf style boots with low heels to help keep your feet from slipping off the footrests. Wear off-road gloves that are padded over the knuckles, long pants, and a long-sleeved shirt or jacket.
- Last but not least, follow the proper driving rules:
 1. Don't carry passengers.
 2. Never ride when tired or under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
 3. Ride on existing trails, when possible.
 4. Don't operate the ATV at excessive speeds.
 5. Some hills are too steep to climb. If it looks too steep, it probably is.
 6. Ride only where you have permission to ride.

As a paramedic, I have transported patients of ATV accidents that have been injured by not following each of the safety guidelines stated above, and yes, some were fatal. It is a sobering thought that someone will not be allowed to live to a ripe old age because they did not exercise the proper amount of caution while using their ATV. Please, be careful out there.

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